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Folktales Collected in the Army

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For Bob Heard
with regards
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WHEN MEN TRAVEL, their folklore goes with them but does not get weighed in with the baggage. Great population movements, such as the gold rush to California and the various tides and crosscurrents in the flow of migration to the western states, helped in the distribution of folklore in the United States. In the diggings and at camping grounds along the trails men swapped stories and songs. Some of the men traveled widely, only to return in the end to their old homes, bringing exotic contributions that have been perpetuated in family and local traditions. Others settled in the West, adding their share to the rich store that now awaits the collector.

War, too, is one of the great movers of men and one of the important cross-fertilizing factors in folklore. It takes men from their own firesides to new places where they meet strangers. It gathers them for varying lengths of time into enforced companionship with men from other sections of the country. To pass the time, soldiers, like most travelers, tell stories and, in consequence, add to each other's repertory.

Those of us who have collected folklore in the East and South know that part of the body of folklore presently known in many neighborhoods was introduced by soldiers returning from the Civil War. The current war will prove to be no exception, for despite the radio, movies, and U.S.O. shows, which are the most popular forms of entertainment for servicemen, folk tales are still to be heard in the Army.

Not only are traditional tall tales and other humorous yarns told, but many are modernized and adapted, and even some new ones are invented. The series of "Tall Tales the Service Men Spin" that ran in several issues of the *Reader's Digest*[1] contains mostly well-known stories refurbished, but also has a few modern ones. Some of the latter are probably the invention of the contributors. It might be worth noting that I have heard several of these stories retold by men who said, in the best storytelling tradition, that they were experiences told by a brother or distant friend, but when pressed, laughingly admitted the source. Here we have an example of tales going into oral tradition from a literary source. However, I have recorded several variants of at least one modern tale widely told in Alaska and Canada but not given in the *Reader's Digest*

[1] *Reader's Digest*, Vol. LXI: p. 19 (August, 1942); pp. 121–22 (October, 1942); pp. 101–2 (November, 1942); Vol. XLII: pp. 73–74 (January, 1943); p. 95 (March, 1943).

series; and a friend of mine heard a Marine from Guadalcanal tell it in a varied form as a Marine story told in the islands. I suspect that other modern tall stories will also be found in purely oral circulation.

The somewhat haphazard group of tales given here, most of which are quite traditional in type, were collected in my personal Odyssey in my first five months in the Army. Basic training in Arkansas and the discipline of an officer candidate school in Iowa are not ideal conditions for folklore work. The Army has a beautifully thorough way of utilizing a man's time and energy while it trains him. Nonetheless, even during such a process a folklorist follows his bent—and there were tales to be had.

The first few were heard under conditions which made it impossible to write them down on the spot—casually in the field in the intervals between activities, or at night in barracks after "Lights Out." Although I have tried to repeat the stories as they were told, they cannot, of course, be considered literal texts. The second group, collected somewhat later, consists of dictated texts and are given unchanged as told.

My first camp was situated only a few miles from the city of Little Rock, Arkansas. Appropriately enough, I got two brief snatches that are often associated with the well-known fiddle-dialogue "The Arkansaw Traveller."

I overheard one boy say.

> Fellow asked me if I knew where Little Rock was. I said I didn't know, but out in the field there was a damn big rock![2]

And on another occasion I heard this:

> It's like the old fellow who was asked, "Where does this road go?" And he says, "Oh, up a ways about a mile, and down about a mile."[3]

Then late one night an Indianapolis boy told a yarn that has also been recorded in Texas.[4]

Most interesting to me were the fragmentary yarns that one husky lad told as we lay on our bunks after the day's activity had slowed down. He had worked with some old pipeline men from the Southwest in an ordnance powder factory in Indiana. He told us of one old-timer who occasionally would spin yarns all through the noon hour. One of his stories was about some well-digging crews that had failed to strike oil after vast expenditure of time and labor.

[2] This question and answer appear occasionally in "The Arkansaw Traveller." See James R. Masterson, *Tall Tales of Arkansaw* (Boston, 1943), pp. 203, 210, 217.

[3] The road which has never gone anywhere is one of the most popular of the questions and answers in the various versions of "The Arkansaw Traveller." For parallels and other references see: *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, I (1942), 103; Masterson, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

[4] A. W. Eddins, "Anecdotes from the Brazos Bottoms," *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society*, XIII (1937), 92–93.

"And then this big nigger would come along with an ax or something like it, and smash it into the ground, and up would shoot a gusher!"[5]

I wish I could learn more about that Negro, for he may be an industrial folk hero. And I'd like to hear more about the powerful pipeline man, who, rather than dig through a rough area to make a channel for a section of huge pipe, would simply lift up the pipe and bend it into shape by hand until it fit the contour of the ground.[6]

This small first group represents my gleanings from Arkansas. I had neither the opportunity nor time to try collecting outside the camp, nor even to make a real effort to get material from my fellow soldiers. Nor can I repeat without extreme bowdlerization the kind of stories army instructors tell their classes to hold their attention.

After my stint of basic training was over, the Army sent me to an officer candidate school in Grinnell, Iowa. At first I had even less time there than I had had in Arkansas. However, when the pressure started to lessen, I became a folklorist again and collected some tales in one of the Grinnell barber shops. I got Charlie Durham, aged seventy-six, the town constable, to dictate to me two tales. The first is a variant of one of the tall tales best-known in this country.

The Wonderful Hunt[7]

Feller worked down on a farm went to get the horses off the pasture one morning, and he thought he'd take his gun along, shoot a squirrel. And he went crosst on a foot log, heard the squirrel—he had an old army musket. He shot the squirrel, and his old musket kicked him off in the crick. He come up with both boots full of fish. The gun barrel split and killed two squirrels—knocked them out on the bank. He had them when he got out.

—I heard someone tell it—Oh long time ago—down south in southern Illinois. I was 'long 'bout ten or twelve years old.

Charlie's second tale is one I was particularly delighted to find because it is quite rare, although I have a version from New Jersey.

The Healing Water

Feller was goin' huntin' with a dog. An' he got caught in a fence, cut the end of his tail off. An' they was right by a spring—they claimed the water in that spring was healing. So they put some on the dog's tail—healed it right up. An' then they seen that done so much good, they picked up the end of the tail and throwed it in the water—and a whole dog came out—live dog.

[5] See John Lee Brooks, "Paul Bunyan: Oil Man," *Publications of the Texas Folk-Lore Society*, VII (1928), 50, in which Paul Bunyan starts a gusher when he hurls his hatchet and it penetrates the ground. For other pipeline stories, see Acel Garland, "Pipeline Days and Paul Bunyan," *ibid.*, pp. 55–61.

[6] For a description of pipeline men and their work, which also gives one folk tale, see Don Eddy, "Pipeline to Victory," *American Magazine*, CXXXV (1943), 34–35, 90–91.

[7] For parallels and references see *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, I (1942), pp. 20–21, 41–42, 53–54, 91–92.

—Feller was tellin' it over in Rex cigar store, oh, 'bout six, seven months ago. One that was tellin' it was from back east in Ohio.

After Charlie told these stories, the barber, Mr. M. O. Stanley, aged sixty, was moved to tell a tale.

THE SPLIT PANTHER[8]

There was a feller told it in here that another feller told it. And he made some kids believe it. This feller was from Kentucky.—Of course it's an unbelievable story, but he made those kids b'lieve it.

—Well, there 's two fellers out a-huntin' one evening and they uz on their way home. They run out of ammunition an' it was gettin' kinda late. An' all at once he felt—just something come over him—that there was somethin' a-followin' him. An' he said to his partner: "I'm gonna turn around and see if there's anything behind us." An' he said when he turned around he seen a panther slippin' up—Said it was 'bout twenty-five yards behind him.

An' he said he'd always heared his folks tell that if you'd light a blaze, that it would scare the animal—it would run away from you. An' he said he lit up a piece of cloth off his clothing, an' when the panther seen it be turned so quick that you could hear his tail crack. An' he run so fast that he run right into a tree an' it split him right in two in the center.

And he said they went back to see what it did to him. So they put him together. An' he said they put him together wrong—they just reversed it—put one front foot in front and one hind foot just opposite. He said they seen their mistake, but they just turned him loose that way—and he went off wigglin' and wobblin'. An' that's the last they ever seen of the panther.

Just a couple of weeks before school was over, continued rains had made mosquitoes a nuisance. A comment on them from a fellow across the hall made me head on the run into his dormitory room. After some persuasion he told some yarns, and we had a very fine liars' club meeting with me acting as scribe.

My first informant was Candidate (now Lieutenant) Aloysius J. Tierny, aged twenty-seven, formerly of West Orange, New Jersey. He had a fine earnest way of telling stories that enhanced their humor. Here is a verbatim notation, together with his comments to me.

Tell them about the mosquitoes from Jersey that make round trips to New York daily and kidnap the babies.[9]—That's all they do, they kidnap them. That's been a joke goin' around Jersey for four or five years.

They also attack squadrons of planes flying over the Jersey meadows—the Newark Airport. In fact one time they had a blackout—they thought it was an air raid. All it was was just a few mosquitoes flying around for exercise, probably looking for some of those babies to kidnap.

That's why we're so efficient in air raids out there. Dive bomber's nothin' new to us. They attack people just like dive bombers. Spot a big juicy man and they attack

[8] See *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, I (1942), 71, for another Kentucky version of the split-animal story. The split dog is one of Baron Münchausen's yarns that has become quite popular in the American storytelling tradition, e.g., in many versions of the Paul Bunyan cycle.

[9] See *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, I (1942), 65–66.

in the same manner as dive bombers. In fact, I think the Germans were out there, spotted these mosquitoes dive bombin' and got the idea from them.—But don't go to Jersey and tell those goddamn things, 'cause you'll get murdered.—Those are actual facts!

Tierny then decided to stop talking, protesting that he knew no more, but his roommate, Joseph R. Jones, aged thirty-five, of Greeley, Colorado, refused to let it drop and related another story.

Before the Big One Comes[10]

They was talkin' about how big the mosquitoes were in different places, how large and ferocious they were. And Tierny spoke up and said he watched two mosquitoes there in New York attack a man. After a struggle they finally overcame the man and dragged him down on the beach and started to eat their supper. 'Bout this time a large one came along, killed the two mosquitoes, and devoured the man himself.—That's the way the story was told to me in this room.

Next, Elmer O. Rickard, aged twenty-four, of Beckley, West Virginia, told this:

Big Fleas

At home in the evenin' we'd call our dog up on the porch where we were sitting—especially in the summer evenin's when the mosquitoes were particularly bad—and we would tickle him so he'd scratch the fleas off his body. And the fleas were large enough that they took care of the mosquitoes—so we'd have a very pleasant evenin'.

That's a damn lie—I made it up.

And then Jones closed the discussion on mosquitoes by informing us soberly:

"You never kill a mosquito out in Wyoming because there's so many thousands of 'em come to the funeral—and you're always worse off than you were before."

And although a little off the subject, Sid Cool, aged twenty-five, formerly of Sullivan, Illinois, gave me this important piece of information:

"I'll tell you what they do with dry oil wells in southern Illinois. They pull 'em up, saw 'em up, and use 'em for post holes.[11]

My last yarn was dictated to me by Lieutenant Ralph L. Gessler, a former lawyer from Blairsville, Pennsylvania, as we rode on the train from Grinnell to Chicago. He commented:

"—I heard it I don't know how long ago—it's been ten years ago anyway. Some farm in Western Pennsylvania. I was out there with an old fellow who was buying wool, and he was always telling the farmers some tall story. And after he finished one whopper, the farmer he was telling it to told him this one."

[10] Compare *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin,* I (1942), 94; also compare *Reader's Digest,* XLI (November, 1942), 102.

[11] For parallels see Garland, *op. cit.* p. 57. The practice is a common one in tall stories.

THE SPLIT BULLET[12]

This fellow was hunting and he only had one bullet left so be started back home. He'd just crossed a little stream when he saw a fox stick its head around the corner of a pointed rock. So he was getting ready to aim when a second fox stuck its head around the second corner of the same rock. So he decided to see whether he couldn't kill both foxes, and he fired directly at the pointed edge of the rock. The bullet divided and killed both foxes. But the gun kicked so much that it knocked him backwards into the stream. When he tried to get up out of the stream, his overalls were so full of trout the buttons flew off—killed a covey of quail.

This collection has been very much limited by the difficulties set up for the recorder by the army's training program; yet it includes a variety wide enough to show how representative it is of the mixture of men that makes up the Army. It seems probable that in a fixed camp with a normal routine and an opportunity to get better acquainted with men over a longer period of time, more tales would be forthcoming. There is also the tantalizing possibility for an army man that he will be sent to some region where the local inhabitants may prove to be willing informants. In either case, if time permits, a folklorist in the army may find he can still do work in his chosen field.

[12] Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York, 1931), p. 61, has a story in which a bullet, split on a rock, kills both a bear and a moose.